

# HISTORY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA'S HIGHWAYS

## And Main Roads WA - the organisation that built them

By the 1920s, road making was not meeting the challenge of motor transport. The main reason for this was the lack of a central roads authority to maintain the most important routes. These routes were, at this time, responsibility of the councils, whom preferred to spend their money on roads to meet local needs rather than on roads that serviced those passing through district.

This problem was heightened by a Commonwealth funding initiative, its *Main Roads Development Act 1923* providing £500,000 annually to the states to be spent on the construction of roads that would aid the development of the country. The arrangements to spend these grants were made by the Roads and Bridges Branch of the Public Works Department, which designed and supervised the works. However, the Commonwealth Government was unhappy about the way the State spent much of the roads grant money, and this created further pressure for change. Local Government also wanted a central roads board and a conference of the Roads Board Association passed a motion that a "...Bill similar to the Country Roads Act in Victoria should be introduced, with modifications suitable and adaptable to Western Australia, and that the board be established to take over control." <sup>1</sup>

A contentious issue in setting up the board was changes to existing financial arrangements, under which the Roads Boards collected licence fees and got a small annual grant from the State Government. "The new proposal was that the Main Roads Board would control all the grants and collect all the vehicle licence fees, which the rural Road Boards had previously kept." <sup>2</sup> Many councils resisted the new idea because if it went ahead they would no longer be guaranteed funds for roadwork. With country interests having a strong influence in the State Parliament, the Bill was debated back and forth in the lower and upper houses, however, change was inevitable. News that the Commonwealth proposed to introduce in 1926 a new roads grant scheme, called the Federal Roads Aid Agreement, to deliver £20 million to the state over 10 years saw that common sense prevailed and the Main Roads Bill was assented to on 31st December 1925 and came into force on 7th June 1926.

The Main Roads Board was to consist of three members, two engineers and a skilled administrator. The Board was to purchase all land, machinery, tools and materials it needed to fulfil its responsibilities. The Board was also to classify a system of roads into two categories: 'Main Roads' - those roads connecting 'large producing areas' with their market or nearest port or railway station, or connecting two or more 'large producing areas' or large population centres with Perth and other areas of the abovementioned description; and 'Developmental Roads' - any road that was not a Main Road. When work on a road which had been declared a developmental road was completed the road was handed over to the relevant Local Government body to maintain. If the road was not maintained to a certain standard, the Main Roads Board could undertake the work and charge the Council for it. "The term Developmental Road was important because the Federal Aid Roads Agreement provided money for roads that helped develop the country." <sup>3</sup>

The two engineers appointed were Edward Tindale and R.J Anketell, neither of whom were specialist road engineers but both had extensive engineering experience in Western Australian conditions. Together, they inspected roads, talked to local authorities, made financial arrangements, talked to the Minister and engineers of the Roads and Bridges Branch of the Public Works Department.

The Board became responsible for 503 developmental roads, 19 main roads and three 'arterial roads' - from Midland Junction to Meekatharra, Midland Junction to Merredin and Perth to Albany. The Main Roads Act didn't give the Board control over Perth Metropolitan roads in general, however, the Board was made responsible for the Perth-Fremantle Rd (later renamed Stirling Highway), the Causeway and the North Fremantle road bridge.

The Authority of the MRB covered the entire state, but it did not have staff in the North West so the Public Works Department represented it there. The PWD Engineer for the NW took care of the day-to-day matters while the Board allocated grants to local authorities and made the important road decisions. Towns in the North West were very isolated from each other and serviced by coastal shipping so no formal roads policy was developed for the region and very little money was spent.

One of the terms of the Federal Aid Roads Agreement was that work done with Commonwealth money had to be let to contract, and the Commonwealth had to approve each item of work that the Board wanted to carry out. The MRB staff expanded rapidly in 1927 in order to prepare all the documentation, surveying, designs and costings for each job. At first the Board tried to ignore this requirement and employ men directly to do the work, which suited the State Labor Government, but the Commonwealth non-labour government began rejecting proposals for work to be carried out by state-employed men.

In 1927 the MRB made the decision to set up district offices to coordinate the work being done in rural areas, appointing a district engineer to be responsible for all work in their district. In 1928, the 8 district offices began operation in Metro, Bunbury, Bridgetown, Geraldton, Narrogin, Albany, Kalgoorlie and Northam. There was no office further north than

Geraldton, as the Board didn't have the resources to work in the North West and at this time the majority of the work was being undertaken in the South West of the State.

During 1927-28 complaints arose from the local road authorities, primarily regarding the cost of roads the MRB was constructing, for at this time the MRB was entitled to charge the local authorities as a whole half the cost of roadmaking in the State. Complex methods of determining the charge for each individual authority involving the length, standards and benefits of roadworks created much dissatisfaction amongst the local authorities. There were also disagreements between the MRB and local boards regarding the standard of construction, often the MRB's standards weren't met due to the local authorities not understanding the drawings or the details of the work they were to do. Complaints about the Board were so common that in August 1928 the Mayor of Perth called a meeting 'to deal with main roads matters' and a conference of the Roads Boards Association of WA was held the next day. Stinging criticism was directed at the MRB's financial assessments but the Board's representative, Edward Tindale, pointed out that 'this was not a matter of the Board being at fault: it was performing a duty imposed on it by the Main Roads Act.'

In April 1930, the Nationalist-Country Party coalition came to power at state level and within a few months had amended the Main Roads Act with two key objectives: to waive the contributions that had been levied on Roads Boards and to abolish the MRB and appoint a Commissioner of Main Roads. From 1 December 1930 the Commissioner of Main Roads held the powers that the Board previously held. Yet the change to a Commissioner had no real significance as far as the Government was concerned: "the previous Minister for Main Roads, McCallum, said he believed the Board had been operating as though it had a membership of one for some time. Tindale had 'controlled the policy of the Board, and has been the dominant figure on the Board.' Appointing him as commissioner merely formalised an existing situation."<sup>4</sup>

During the Depression, Main Roads undertook a number of projects but often struggled to make work suitable for unskilled labourers to do. Three major projects were undertaken during this time, the Stirling Highway upgrade, the Fremantle Traffic Bridge and the sealing of the Albany Highway, before Main Roads turned its attention towards the war effort.

Of the majority of the work Main Roads did during the war, the construction of military aerodromes was the most important. Main Roads constructed 90 percent of the runways constructed during WW2 in WA. The war took Main Roads into the most isolated parts of the state for the first time. Roads in the northwest had been little more than dirt tracks. They were infrequently used in the dry season and were mostly impassable in the wet season due to flooding. Few people lived there and they accepted the pioneering conditions. Not many pastoralists owned motor cars or trucks, and cattle were driven overland on the hoof. The Army had made extensive use of WA's roads during the war. In the northwest the old tracks had not been strong enough to cope with the constant and heavy military traffic and they had been severely damaged. Roads Boards there claimed compensation for the damage and after a thorough inspection the Army agreed to contribute to the cost of reconstructing many of the roads, providing that the local authorities also contributed.

Main Roads was also involved in the paranoia that surrounded the threat of invasion during World War 2. Leigh Edmonds describes the situation: "In February 1942 the Japanese forces seemed unstoppable and Australians were afraid that an invasion was imminent. Preparations for the invasion included removing from all roads direction signs that showed the routes to important centres, particularly in the area inland from the coast for 20 miles from Geraldton around to Esperance. The signs were stored so that they could be put back later if the threat passed. By May 1942 the military situation looked even worse, and orders were issued to take down all signs within 100 miles of the coast. Milepost numbers were also removed but the posts were left so that only the numbers had to be put back on if the situation improved. (It was in July 1943 that orders were issued for all the signs and milepost numbers to be put back, the Japanese retreat having begun.)"<sup>5</sup>

Towards the end of the war the State Government decided to take a keener interest in the northwest of the state. In December 1944 it appointed a committee to examine ways to develop the region, including work on water supplies, ports roads, mining, oil prospecting and primary production. A sub-committee investigated and reported on the condition of transport in the northwest and how it could be improved. The committee suggested that constructing earth roads, lightly gravelled where the country was difficult, with crossings of stone or concrete on the major rivers could provide reasonable road facilities. This would not provide all-weather roads but they would be usable in all but the worst conditions. The work would create 3799 miles of roads at a cost of £1,173,000 (1944) and it would be the first stage towards helping the growth of industry and pastoralism.

The WA Government liked the report and decided to develop a special organisation under the control of Main Roads to carry out roadworks in the northwest. Modern roadmaking equipment would make greater road improvements possible in many parts of the region despite the limited funds available, however, Main Roads was very short of equipment and manpower and it would be some time before major improvements in the roads would be seen.

"The existing North West operations of Main Roads became the basis of the new organisation. It had established a permanent presence in the region in 1940 when it appointed Ron Duncan...to the position of Assistant Engineer of the North West, basing him in Carnarvon...Duncan became responsible for the main roads in the region stretching from Shark Bay to Wyndham. Being the only roads engineer there, he was almost a one-man band. At least twice a year he drove from Carnarvon to Wyndham and back, often camping overnight in creek beds or staying with Main Roads workers. This was down-to-earth pioneering work."<sup>6</sup>

In 1950 the sealed road ended just north of Northampton and, on the inland route, just south of Miling. With the exceptions of some sealing in and around towns, everything else was unsealed. "In the dry season the roads were usually dusty and, in the worst parts such as the notorious Pardoo Sands, sometimes impossible to drive over because they were little more than sand. In some places limestone outcrops made driving hard and cut up tyres; in other areas the roads could have large unseen bulldust holes. The distances were immense and driving was usually a test of endurance, with the heat and the dust from the unsealed roads making conditions very unpleasant.

In the seasonal wet, rivers flooded and many roads became very boggy, to the extent that it was almost impossible to move around in the area. To make matters worse, floods could wash away roads and crossings as though they were never there and, in the Pilbara and Gascoyne regions in particular, cyclones could rip up weeks worth of road construction effort in minutes. The work that Main Roads could do was almost insignificant against the size of the region and the forces of nature."

The original tracks in the area had followed Aboriginal paths or the meandering journeys of old gold prospectors and later they connected the stations and watering holes. There was no need for through routes and the haphazard locations of the tracks reflected that. However, over time new and better alignments were found and roads constructed.

When oil exploration began in the West Kimberley in the early 1950s Main Roads constructed the exploration roads and the oil companies paid for them at full cost. This support of oil exploration was continued into later years when large reserves of natural gas were found in the northwest.

Cattle was the primary industry of the northwest region with sprawling stations of up to one million hectares. It often took weeks of droving to get cattle from the stations to the ports or the meatworks and it was acknowledged that if stock could be transported more efficiently, much greater profits could be made by the industry. In 1949 the State Government asked the Commonwealth to help develop the beef industry in the Kimberley. One of the proposals it made was for the construction of a road from Wyndham to Nicholson, 282 miles, so that stations along the Ord River could take their cattle by truck to the meatworks at Wyndham. The Commonwealth passed the State Grants (Encouragement of Beef Production) Act 1949 in October and work began on the road in 1950, completed in 1956 (costing £713,677.)

In March 1952 BP Australia (then the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) reached an agreement with the State Government to build a (pounds)40 million oil refinery at Kwinana. The Government agreed to provide infrastructure – including electricity, water, roads, railways, a safe channel to the sea and a thousand state houses at Kwinana – within three years. In October 1952 BHP agreed to construct a steel rolling mill near the refinery and thus the Kwinana industrial strip was born.

Commissioner Jim Young suggested that legislation should be passed to allow construction of 'controlled access roads' – the first to be constructed to connect Kwinana with Perth. The State Government agreed and so the Main Roads Act was amended to make a provision for 'controlled access roads' before the end of 1952.

Kwinana was only the beginning of Main Roads' involvement with major metropolitan development. The need for a regional plan for Perth had been obvious for some time, but the decision to create the Kwinana industrial complex made a plan imperative and urgent. Gordon Stephenson, Professor of Civic Design at the University of Liverpool (UK), was invited to prepare such a plan and he arrived in January 1953.

In 1955 Stephenson and J.A. Hepburn, the Town Planning Commissioner, released their Plan for the Metropolitan Region, Perth and Fremantle, 1955. It was a book of over 300 pages, which examined in detail every facet of life in Perth and suggested how the city might be developed for a metropolitan population likely to reach 1,400,000 by the end of the century. The Stephenson plan proposed a road network to cope with 400% more traffic than there was in 1955 and recommended the construction of eight new highways with a total length of about 85 miles. The routes of the new major regional highways were carefully selected to provide the best locations and directions, to avoid areas of improved land where possible and to be cheaper and more effective than widening existing roads. The new highways proposed were: Perth-Kwinana Hwy [Kwinana Freeway], Yanchep Hwy [Mitchell Fwy], Beechboro-Gosnells Hwy [Tonkin Hwy], Fremantle-Midland Junction Hwy [Roe Hwy], North Perimeter Hwy [Reid Hwy], Swan River Dr, Burswood Hwy [Graham Farmer Fwy] and Kwinana-Mundijong Hwy.

When Stephenson was appointed to advise on the development of a regional plan, no urban road or transport planning body existed and Stephenson looked to Main Roads for the technical expertise he needed. Thus began the process whereby Main Roads ceased to be primarily a country road construction authority and took on responsibility for Perth's road and transport planning and traffic management. It cooperated with Stephenson and Hepburn in developing the 1955 plan by advising on road alignment and traffic matters even though there was no traffic or planning database to work from.

The Stephenson Plan recommended that a regional planning authority be established to prepare a formal regional plan based on the report and to implement it. In 1959 legislation was passed to create a Metropolitan Region and establish an authority to formulate and administer the regional planning scheme. The following year the Metropolitan Region Planning Authority was appointed and the initial planning scheme was revised, with important amendments, creating the Metropolitan Regional Scheme Plan, which was completed in 1962 and adopted in 1963.

Commissioner Leach, in September 1955, urged that the land required for future roads should be acquired without delay otherwise Main Roads would miss the opportunity to acquire it cheaply. Perth was entering a period of rapid development and this decision proved to be of key importance to the orderly development of the region. Even before the Stephenson Plan was released to public Main Roads had been investigating the best routes for the new highways, so, as soon as the

plan was released, Main Roads began to acquire land required for the proposed highways using the compulsory acquisition powers in the Public Works Act. Most planning had to be done discreetly to prevent land speculation, especially within the boundaries of the City of Perth.

The far-sightedness of the planning meant that land for some roads was being bought for as little as (pounds)10 an acre – e.g. the Roe Highway. Undertaking this planning and land acquisition so early in the piece meant that Main Roads would provide the residents of Perth with an effective and relatively cheap road system – something sorely lacking in most other states.

An origin-destination survey of motorists travelling into and around the CBD was conducted in May 1957 and more than 26,000 people (half of those given survey cards) replied. The report on the findings of the survey was released a year later; the most important finding being that a proposed connection between the Narrows Bridge and the Mitchell Fwy would only be used by about 1300 vehicles an hour – therefore the cost of building it immediately could not be justified. The key to Perth's road network was a bridge across the Swan River at the Narrows to connect the Perth CBD to South Perth and areas beyond. This proposal was not a new one, the Public Works Department having drawn up plans for a bridge in 1901 and Main Roads having examined the need for a bridge in 1947 but finding the expense unjustified. Approval was given to the project in November 1954 and, following a five-year construction program, the Narrows Bridge was opened to traffic on 13 November 1959.

Until the 1950s WA had relied on police officers on points duty to control traffic flows. Commissioner Leach decided in 1951 to examine the possibility of using traffic lights and asked Don Aitken (future Commissioner who was on leave in London at the time) to conduct investigations on the British use of traffic lights. Aitken recommended that traffic counts should be undertaken at all city intersections to ascertain where lights would be most appropriate. After university students had counted about 20 intersections in the CBD, the decision was made to put the first set of lights at the West Perth subway (intersection of Railway Pde & Sutherland St) in December 1953. Soon afterwards four sets were installed on William St, all of them vehicle actuated to make traffic flows more efficient.

The opening of the Kwinana oil refinery helped Main Roads' sealing program as it meant that bitumen no longer had to be imported. The increased supply coincided with the Contributory Bitumen Surfacing Scheme under which Main Roads financially assisted many local authorities to seal a total of 555 miles of developmental roads over four years (1954-57). Due to its popularity the scheme was extended for many years, although with some limitations, and it made a huge contribution to the development of a network of sealed roads in rural WA.

There was steady growth in the development of WA's rural roads during the 1950s – Main Roads improved the alignments of many roads in the hilly and wooded areas of the southwest and undertook a large number of small jobs to improve the worst sections of road across the state. For example, during 1954/55, on the road from Perth to Southern Cross (now Gt. Eastern Hwy), about 11 miles of road were widened, 1.5 miles reconstructed and another 20 miles resealed. The following year another 27 miles were widened and 3.5 miles were sealed, with two narrow timber bridges being replaced with two pre-cast concrete structures.<sup>8</sup> The standard sealing width for lightly traveled roads was 12 feet, but in some areas where topography, weather and rapid growth demanded it, the seal was extended to 18 feet.

In 1956 an interdepartmental committee was set up to examine the closure of 'non-paying' railway lines (i.e. those lines that were not making a profit). Commissioner Leach was appointed to the committee because the successful closure of railways would depend on the provision of satisfactory roads. The recommendations of the committee included that a number of lines should be closed in four stages, totaling just over 2000 miles. The saving from closing these lines was expected to (pounds) 7.5 million but some roads would need to be improved. The State Government decided to adopt only some of the committee's recommendations and thus 842 miles of railway were closed in agricultural and mining areas. Roads were also beginning to be preferred in areas where railways did exist as many areas were served by spur lines that connected to main trunk lines, meaning the roads were often more direct. The closure of rail lines and the new land settlement schemes meant that Main Roads was flat out constructing sealed roads and other local roads for the newly opened up farming land at locations like Esperance and Eneabba.

In 1950 there were only about 100 miles of sealed road in the Kalgoorlie district, the rest of the roads consisting of only formed earth. Traffic in this area was light – a daily average of 44 vehicles used the road between Southern Cross and Coolgardie while between Coolgardie and Norseman the daily average was only 33.

Growth in the land settlement areas meant that it became necessary for Main Roads to create more districts to better manage the large amounts of construction work. Albany-Narrogin was broken into two separate districts and in July 1957 the new district of Moora was created to handle the rapid development of agriculture in the region. This district was later disbanded and re-absorbed into the surrounding Geraldton and Northam districts in July 1982 when the vast majority of the work was completed.

During the late 1950s the proportion of Main Roads funds that were being spent in the northwest of the state rose from 20 to 23%. It was there that Main Roads was focusing much of its attention because building and maintaining roads the north was more difficult than in any other area of the state. From 1940 through to the mid-1950s Ron Duncan had carried the load entirely on his shoulders but it was realised the northwest had become too big for one man. When Duncan was

forced to retire due to throat cancer in 1959, Main Roads decided to establish a new district office in the region. So from 8 January 1960 Albert Tognolini (future Commissioner) commenced work as District Engineer at Derby.

Work in the northwest of the state increased dramatically when the Federal Government passed the Western Australian Grants (Beef cattle Roads) Act in 1961 as part of a strategy to develop roads in northern Australia and thus increasing the export earnings of the cattle industry.

At first there were three main objectives of the Beef Roads Scheme in WA – upgrading the Gt. Northern Hwy between Halls Creek and Wyndham; upgrading the road between Wyndham and Nicholson (named Duncan Highway in 1961 in honour of Ron Duncan) and the construction of bridges over the Ord River at Bandicoot Bar and over the Dunham River near its junction with the Ord River. A year later the scheme was upgraded to run for five more years and the projects were expanded to include: improving the Gt. Northern Hwy between Broome and Halls Ck; the Duncan Highway between Halls Creek and Nicholson; providing an all-weather access road from Wyndham to Kununurra; developing a new road from Derby through the King Leopold Ranges to Mount House and Glenroy; and constructing a number of bridges over major rivers and large creeks predominately in the East Kimberley.

The Beef Roads scheme was showing results as early as 1963. Australia's beef exports in the financial year ending June 1963 were three times as much as those in 1960/61.

Road construction in the northwest was almost a production line, with surveyors sending their data back to the office, the road being designed and the draftsman producing plans rapidly so that the route could be pegged. There was not much time to investigate alternate routes but Main Roads did a good job of road location under extreme pressure.

The northwest was so vast and the roads were so long that improvements could only be made in small stages over a long period of time. Some river crossings were sealed to prevent scouring when it rained and a few sections of major roads were sealed but most of the roads remained as natural soil or gravel. Good road-making gravels were scarce in the northwest of the state and therefore were not as commonly used as they were in the south.

Main Roads was also involved in the Ord River Scheme, building roads for the new town of Kununurra in 1959 which was the centre for the scheme.

In 1961 a major cyclone passed through the Carnarvon area and with it came torrential rain and record flooding that washed away much of the road system. Floodways that had survived for thirty years were washed away without a trace. The Wittenoom Gorge was flooded and the water flow was so strong that it destroyed thirteen concrete floodways and two miles of sealed road. The Fortescue River flooded to a width of 14 miles. During the floods, Carnarvon District Engineer, Tom Pedersen, flew over the road from Carnarvon to Port Hedland and noticed that the road was flooded in areas that were built on the flood plain. He discovered that if the road was moved inland in some places it would be up on higher ground and that the rivers were narrower there, thus being easier to bridge. Not long afterwards he gained approval to realign the road between Barradale and Peedumulla so that it avoided the worst parts of the Ashburton River floodplain. A new access road was also constructed to the town of Onslow which was bypassed by the 148km deviation.

In January 1964 Digby Leach retired after 12 years as Commissioner, replaced by John Punch. Leach is remembered as 'The Black Commissioner' because he was totally committed to extending the reach of sealed roads in WA. He preferred to see the narrow 12-foot wide sealed roads extended as far as possible to improve the lives of as many people as possible, rather than building shorter-wider roads. His replacement, John Punch, was Commissioner for barely a year before he passed away while working in his backyard – he had a heart condition. Don Aitken was appointed his successor in April 1965.

1969 was the most significant year for road building in WA since the beginning of Commonwealth road grants. A reworking of the distribution formula meant that WA received a dramatic reduction in funds. The Commonwealth Aid Roads Act 1969 also introduced other changes, categorising the funds and allocating a specific amount to be spent on each. This imposed a severe restraint on how the grants could be spent and the resulting imbalance in funding and expenditure needs could only be overcome by reallocating state funds. At the time, State funds were largely committed to payments to local authorities through the Central Trust Fund and this placed no incentive on the councils to spend their own money on roadwork. A major change in funding arrangements was agreed to, with all license fees – which local authorities in country areas had collected themselves – being paid into the Main Roads Trust Account. In return the local authorities were guaranteed grants provided the councils met certain expenditure quota.

In November 1969 the first magnetic loop detectors were installed, at the intersection of Leach Hwy and North Lake Rd. Prior to this, a large trench was dug across each lane in the road and a reinforced concrete block was poured, holding a metallic channel in which a rubber tube was fitted, slightly raised from the surface. When a vehicle drove over the tube it created a pneumatic pulse which operated an electric contact. This was costly to install and maintain.

In December 1972 the Commonwealth established a National Highway Study Team to survey Australia's major arterial roads. It found that many were significantly deficient, especially those in northern Australia. The study used the measure of traffic volumes on highways to justify their provision, however, the need for a highway system right around Australia was recognised. The result of the study was three interlinking pieces of legislation, the National Roads Act 1974, the Roads Grants Act 1974 and the Transport (Planning and Research) Act 1974.

The National Roads Act legislated the Government's decision to take full financial responsibility for constructing and

maintaining the national highways – 9800 miles of roads, of which 3100 miles were unsealed and 70 percent of the sealed sections were assessed as below National Highway standards. Under this new arrangement the Commonwealth set the standards for construction and maintenance but allowed the states to decide what work should be done each year – subject to Commonwealth approval.

In July 1976 a new road classification system was introduced, the first comprehensive review of the status of WA's roads since Main Roads had been established in 1926. The old system had originally provided only two classifications – 'main road' and 'developmental road' – and a further classification of 'controlled access road' was added in 1952. By the mid 1970s the use of WA's roads had grown and changed so much that this system was unworkable and the Commonwealth's decision to fund the National Highways had to be recognised. Thus, after extensive study, a new classification system was introduced providing three categories – 'highways', 'main roads' and 'secondary roads' the latter category being the responsibility of local authorities.

It had become obvious that an extensive transportation study of the Perth region was needed so a study team was formed with representatives from Main Roads, the Town Planning Department, and the consultant firm Maunsell and Partners. The team's job was to carry out a study to 'determine the transport needs of the Perth region for the next twenty years and propose a system to satisfy those needs'. The Perth Region Transport Study was commenced in early 1970 and was completed in December of that year. The study had an advantage over the earlier Stephenson plans of more comprehensive traffic data and access to modern computing. Nonetheless, the study simply validated the proposals in the Stephenson Plan and provided the necessary data to carry out the design and staging of the Mitchell Freeway, along with other important projects.

One important recommendation of the study was that the metropolitan passenger rail network should be replaced by a busway along each existing railway reserve. It was established that a busway could handle as many passengers more economically and more conveniently than a railway and buses had the advantage of being able to leave the busway to distribute passengers at the end of the journey.

Unsurprisingly, this proposal met a great deal of opposition. Main Roads decided to accommodate a busway in the median of the Mitchell Freeway and design the roads and bridges so the busway could be later constructed if the need arose. Because of the strong support for a railway option, Main Roads agreed to design the busway so it could be easily replaced by rail if that should ever become economically feasible. Despite this provision, nobody in Main Roads thought anyone would decide to construct a railway when the more efficient busway was the way to go. <sup>9</sup>

As a response to the gradual deterioration of roadside flora, in September 1962 the Government decided that road reserves should be 5 chains (330 feet) through alienated land and 10 chains (660 feet) wide through crown land where the country was suitable for flora preservation.

In October 1982 the Commonwealth Government announced that it was establishing the Australian Bicentennial Road Development program, providing an estimated \$2.5 billion over the following six years – on top of the existing Commonwealth grants. The new program recognised that the standard of Australia's roads was had been declining since the 1970s due to inflation – which caused road funding to steadily diminish in real terms.

A large number of improvements were undertaken on the North West Coastal Hwy as part of the ABRD program. These were necessary because heavy vehicles, particularly those associated with the mining development, were putting great stress on the road.

In 1983 one of the Labor Government's election promises was that a four-lane highway would be provided between Perth and Bunbury. Main Roads planned to meet this commitment by gradually upgrading existing road. The first stage was completed on 17 October 1984, when the final link in the dual carriageway between Perth and Mandurah was opened to traffic. The next important step was the completion of the Mandurah Bypass – the first stage between Mandurah Tce and Pinjarra Rd having been completed in May 1981. The main feature of the second stage was the bridge across the Mandurah Estuary and it was opened to traffic on 18 October 1986.

Major winds of change began to blow through Main Roads in the 1980s. In line with other Government departments across the country, Main Roads became more like a business than a bureaucracy. A change in Government in 1983 also brought about the uninformed notions that because the construction of WA's road system was nearly completed, Main Roads needed less funds. Commissioner Don Aitken tried in earnest to make the point that the maintenance task would steadily increase, even as the rate of construction slowed. A Functional Review Committee was appointed in late 1983 to undertake a comprehensive review of Main Roads, which was largely unwelcomed. However, after all the time and effort, the Review brought only a few minor changes to Main Roads.

The Labour Government of the mid-1980s abolished the Main Roads Trust Fund, instead raising petrol taxes and depositing the revenue into a new transport Trust Fund. While Main Roads still got the majority share, the money in the Fund was directed according to the Government's transport priorities.

On 23 October 1987 Don Aitken officially retired following continued bouts of ill health. He had held been Commissioner for 22 years and was honoured in May 1993 when the Main Roads head office building was named the Don Aitken Centre. Albert Tognolini was appointed as his replacement in December 1987. Tognolini had served as Assistant Commissioner since 1969 and was a "quiet man of distinguished character with an immense knowledge and respect for engineering, an intimate knowledge of Main Roads and a vast experience of the WA road system." <sup>10</sup>

During Tognolini's reign of three years there was a shift in Main Roads from being a road planning, designing, constructing

and maintaining authority to focusing on a new role of maintaining and managing the road system. There was a public perception that the road system had been fully developed, and this was coupled with the general trend towards 'smaller government', with greater use being made of the private sector.

Albert Tognolini retired as Commissioner on 7 December 1990 after almost 41 years with Main Roads. He was the last of the generation that had grown up with Main Roads as it expanded rapidly during the long boom that started in the 1950s. Ken Michael was appointed his successor on 5 April 1991. In April 1992 he announced that the organisation, which had been known for the best part of six years as the Main Roads Department, would be known in future as Main Roads Western Australia. The change was designed to give the organisation a more personal voice by moving from the commonly used short name 'the Department', which seemed bureaucratic and formal, to 'Main Roads' to give it a more friendly tone.

During the mid 1990s Main Roads continued to change from service provider to service purchaser and manager. In 1996 amendments to the Main Roads Act made several minor and two major changes to how Main Roads would operate into the future. One part of the amended act created a Main Roads Advisory Board of five people to advise the Commissioner and Minister on the needs of WA's road network. This was the type of Board that Don Aitken had tried to set up a decade earlier with a similar purpose: to bring the community formally into the process of providing road services.

The other major amendment to the act changed the requirement that the Commissioner of Main Roads must be a qualified engineer. This requirement was necessary in early times because Main Roads had been an engineering organisation. The amendment showed just how much the organisation had changed: in 1996 the primary requirement of the Commissioner was the ability to lead and manage a modern service-providing organisation. There was much greater emphasis on the role of owning and managing the road network and its use. "Perhaps the change was really no more significant than retitling Divisional Engineers as Regional Managers the previous year, but it was a highly symbolic change." <sup>11</sup>

All those changes created what Main Roads is now - a maintenance and management authority. Nearly all work these days is carried out by contract and the only significant new construction is in the outer areas of the Perth area. Sealing work continues on some more remote roads, such as the Goldfields Highway, but the development of WA's road system has been largely completed.

1. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.22
2. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.23
3. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.25
4. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.47
5. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.97
6. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.109
7. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.121
8. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.149
9. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.251
10. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p.347
11. Edmonds, L.; *The Vital Link: A History of Main Roads Western Australia 1926-1996*; 1997; p. 423

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